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EKPHRASIS AS A PATH TO EPIPHANY

Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens.

Simonides of Keos, recorded by Plutarch in *De gloria Atheniensium*

I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.

Plato through Socrates in *Phaedrus*

The present article is a reflection on a deep-seated intimacy between verbal and visual arts. The aim of the subsequent discussion is to posit and expound the link between intertextuality and ekphrasis as two notions that in recent time have been widely circulating in the language of literary criticism and in the discussion of fine arts. Furthermore, the article seeks to illustrate how ekphrasis, which may be viewed as a form of intertextual reading incorporated into the body and structure of a work of literature, enhances meaning, sharpens imaginative impact and in consequence leads to epiphany.

In current literary scholarship the notion of intertextuality, understood broadly as various forms of interrelation between a multiplicity of texts as well as different literary genres, can be found among the most extensively and

intensively exploited critical concepts. Although the term has become particularly popular in the academic discourse in the 1970s, after it was coined and introduced by Julia Kristeva in her influential essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," the very notion of intertextuality is undoubtedly older than either Kristeva's conception of a new mode of semiotics and relations between textual structures, or respective Saussurean and Bakhtinian theories which contributed to the emergence of the concept. Already in the 1920s T.S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" speaks of a huge edifice of literature which is seen as a dynamic entity, where the arrival of a new element changes the appearance of the whole, and where each component necessarily enters into an intercourse with other components. Kristeva's later definition of intertextuality as a "mosaic of quotations" and her perception of any text as "the absorption and transformation of another [text]" (Moi 37) is close to the view of T.S. Eliot, and both on the whole seem to refer primarily to literary discourse. The intertextual approach, however, need not essentially be tied up with the text conceived exclusively in terms of verbal structures. Kristeva in her semiotic analyses admits the possibility of extending the notion of intertextuality beyond strictly literary genres and to include other art forms as a range of diverse texts, all of which have the potential to get engaged in a dialogue between different modes of art.

If the text is viewed in such enlarged perspective comprising other modes of art, e.g. combining the literary with the visual, then post-modern idiom of intertextuality comes very close to what since antiquity has been known in rhetoric by its Greek name as ekphrasis, literally meaning "speaking out," and defined in simplest and most general terms as a strategy which "involves the attempt to describe a visual work of art in words […] [and] to encapsulate a visual image or perception or effect in language" (Bennett & Royle 321). Both intertextual and ekphrastic reading concentrate upon relations, influences and discernible parallels between different texts, with the crucial difference that ekphrasis concerns texts registered in different art forms. The phenomenon of ekphrasis has been attracting critical attention especially since modernity, which was marked by a strong tendency to abolish, or at least to obliterate, the boundaries between different literary genres and different modes of art. It has been gaining prominence in post-modern times for in the present-day culture, as W.J. Thomas Mitchell claims, the earlier "linguistic turn" has been superseded by the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 10).

However, the correspondences between poetry, or what modern critical jargon calls broadly "literature," and painting were recognized very early. Plato put that awareness in the mouth of Socrates in the course of his questing dialogues with Phaedrus; and Horace most succinctly epitomized it in his *Ars Poetica* in the famous dictum: *ut pictura poesis*. Horatian enigmatic statement

regarding the nature of the link between poetry and painting gave rise to many interpretations, academic controversies and intellectual debates which involved questions of evaluation of the respective arts, the possible superiority of one to the other, their similar genesis or structures. No matter how intriguing such considerations may be, they are not going to be addressed in the following discussion which will concentrate on the examination of two particular cases of the interlocking of literary art with painting. The works of literature chosen for the analysis comprise poetry, represented by W.H. Auden's short poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts," written in the 1930s, and narrative prose represented by Muriel Spark's novel *The Only Problem* (1984). The focus of interest will be primarily on how the intertwining of the literary with the visual develops meaning, and how it notably contributes to the building up of the message conveyed by the work of art.

The "Sister Arts" tradition based upon the affinity between literature and painting has always shown the tendency to emphasise their kinship and harmonious coexistence. It can be claimed, however, that the observable proximity of the related arts to some extent also implies their complementariness. The underlying assumption of the ensuing analysis is that the aesthetic intercourse between literature and painting enlarges and sharpens potential meaning that is stored as a deposit of ideas in the work of art. Consequently, the strategies such as ekphrasis, which involve the convergence of the visual with the verbal, serve the purpose of the advancement of the communicative aspect of art. It is especially relevant for literature that defines itself in terms of words and therefore – due to its nature – it must be viewed from the vantage point of communication. Since the communicative act is inscribed into the literary work of art, it seems that the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue is the best way of framing the intricate relationship between imaginative writing and painting. It ought to be remembered that the two "interlocutors" in that dialogic relation are two distinct and concurrently overlapping texts of culture or, to use a more traditional critical idiom, they are two arts which share the same ontological status that pertains to all art, even though they use different means of expression, i.e. words and images painted on the canvas.

If the earlier name *ekphrasis* applied to the interdependence of art "speaking-out" about itself is linked with the later concept of intertextuality, then their common denominator can be found in the *modus operandi* of dialogue. The dialogic perspective appears to be the most satisfactory formula to render multifaceted interconnections at the junction of literature and painting, for it best does justice to the innermost character of that intricate liaison. While *ekphrasis* underscores the element of description, and intertextuality foregrounds the mechanics of shifting structures, the dialogic discourse brings into high relief both the message and the craving for its communi-

cation as well as the yearning for knowledge which can be shared with "the other" that is placed at the receiving end of the art object.

It is best illustrated in the opening lines of "Musée des Beaux Arts," where W.H. Auden addresses the issue of supreme knowledge which gets attributed in the poem to great painters who can communicate it through their masterpieces:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position; […] (123)

A distinct tone of irrefutable certitude can be detected in the forceful statement: "they were never wrong." It does not invite either outright disagreement or even mild polemic. The poet simply communicates his epiphanic perception while contemplating a work of painting in the Brussels art gallery evoked in the title. The painting which provides framing for the poem is Pieter Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus."[1] The work of poetry becomes here a transcription of the dialogue between the poet's insight into the nature of suffering and the painter's presentation of his vision of a particular case of pain and anguish.

The well-known mythological story of Icarus, whose attempt to fly to freedom and rise to the sun was dramatically terminated by his fall into the sea, has become part of Western cultural heritage. Yet Icarus is hardly visible in the painting, for only his legs, in the right-hand bottom corner of the canvas, emerge from the water. The poetic persona that is cast in the mould of a visitor in the Musée des Beaux Arts, as a viewer immersed in the world of painting, faithfully follows the vision of the painter. In that vision Icarus is not associated with the bold endeavour stemming from man's belief in his own worth and capacity; nor is he the embodiment of human aspirations eager to challenge impediments, overcome barriers and cross boundaries. Instead, he is presented as a man defeated by the powers of Nature and experiencing not only the torment of the fall but also the unspeakable agony of death. The title of Bruegel's painting is highly significant in its marginalizing the drama of the falling Icarus whose function in the picture is reduced to complementing

[1] "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," oil on canvas, dated for the second half of the 16th century, is housed in the Brussels Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique). For a long time it was attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder; now, however, it is thought to be a very good copy of Bruegel's original by an unkown artist belonging to the so-called Circle of Pieter Bruegel. In his poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" W.H. Auden refers to "Brueghel," spelled with 'h', which is the spelling Pieter Bruegel the Elder abandoned later in his life, but which was retained by his sons Pieter Brueghel the Younger, and Jan.

the landscape: "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Likewise, the title of the poem does not draw attention to Icarus' tragedy, but underscores the aesthetic dispassionateness and calm distance of works of art displayed in the picture gallery. With the grand figure of Icarus withdrawn to the background, the focus of both the painting and the poem is simply on human individual suffering.

Unsurprisingly, "Musée des Beaux Arts" has been most frequently construed as a poetic commentary on suffering which meets with indifference or goes completely unnoticed. At first glance it seems that the entire imagery of W.H. Auden's poem supports such interpretation, which is markedly evident in the poem's ekphrastic discourse:

> In Bruegel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster […]
>
> […] and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on. (124)

The smooth undisturbed pace of verse slowed down by a number of liquids, e.g. "falling," "sailed calmly on," adds to the mood of calmness which bespeaks detachment and borders on the apparent lack of concern. If the poem were divorced from its connection with Bruegel's painting the reading which foregrounds one's fundamental loneliness in the face of suffering would undoubtedly suffice. But here literary art is inextricably connected with the visual; poetry is married to painting, and a new quality of interpretation emerges out of the ties of the dialogue which binds that union of "Sister Arts." The imaginative and epistemological scope of the poem gets extended beyond what poetry could communicate only by itself without getting engaged in the intercourse with painting. In consequence the meaning of the poem is mediated by its reference to the painting. Bruegel's masterpiece evoked in Auden's poem completes and fulfils the message which poetry attempts to verbalise, and which constitutes part of the Old Masters' cognizant vision captured through their art.

The beginning of "Musée des Beaux Arts" contains a compressed laudation of the Old Masters' insightful understanding of the "human position" of suffering. It is worth noting that the laudation contains nothing about either Icarus or general unconcern with misery and afflictions affecting others. The focal point of the artist's exquisite understanding is to be located in the word "position" ("how well they understood / Its human position"), which first and foremost refers to the composition of the painting, i.e. placing its various elements within the framework of the canvas. It is at the crucial point of "hu-

man position" that the ekphrastic inclusion of the painting into the poetic discourse throws light upon the ontological status of human suffering and thus it allows the reader of poetry to participate in the epiphanic perception which is engendered by the visual art.

As portrayed by Bruegel, human suffering occupies only a marginal section of the huge canvas which on the whole represents a beautiful landscape, perfect in its serenity and composure. Icarus' fall, when viewed against such broader perspective, turns out to be only a mere accidental which does not break up the supreme harmony of the landscape. That is why in the imagery of the poem "the sun shone/ As it had to" and "the expensive delicate ship […]/ Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." The viewer meditating Bruegel's vision is not in the first place overwhelmed by the drama of human plight; he is rather soothed and uplifted by the tranquil majesty of the landscape. Paradoxically, the message which transpires from the painting is that personal tragedy matters relatively little in the overall scheme of things, which is essentially good, and that anguish experienced on an individual basis never strikes the final note in the magnificent symphony of the world. Accordingly Auden's poem is not primarily about indifference to individual tragedy. Since Icarus' frustration and pain are placed neither in the foreground nor in the centre of the painting, the poem's message is affirmative, for it recognizes the proper hierarchy, where suffering is eclipsed by the sun shining and dissolved in the expanse of the sea: "the white legs disappearing into the green/ Water."

Such reading of the poem would be impossible without perceptive listening to the dialogue between "Sister Arts" of poetry and painting. In her book on visionary writing Elizabeth Jennings, who was not only a poet herself but also an attentive reader of poetry and a discerning admirer of art, claims that the compounding of the visual with the literary not only assists the sharing of the artist's vision but, more importantly, it permits the coming into being of a new quality which enhances the existing work of art. Hence *ekphrasis* is accorded a higher status and becomes a way towards a fuller and sharper vision: "The visual arts help him [St-John Perse] to pass over his art of words to us; they assist the sharing of his vision. […] One art helps another, one medium links with another; but Braques's birds are not simply described to us, they are transformed by the close scrutiny of Perse's view of them" (Jennings 147–148). Although Jennings comments here on one particular artist, her words have a more general application for in fact they refer to any dialogue between graphic and literary arts.

A similar intertextual dialogue producing an analogous effect of illuminated understanding can be also found in works of fiction. The article proposes to look closer at one of them, i.e. Muriel Spark's novel *The Only Problem*. Like "Musée des Beaux Arts" Spark's novel is also artistically designed

around the problem of suffering, which is cast in the fictional discourse as "the only problem" crucial for man's life and therefore worth serious examination. The main protagonist of the novel, Harvey Gotham, a multimillionaire living in a secluded place in the French Vosges, is a philosopher and scholar single-mindedly dedicated to the study of the biblical *Book of Job*. Harvey is working on a monograph which he hopes would elucidate the enigma embodied in Job's predicament that concerns unjust suffering allowed by benevolent God. However, his fairly comfortable life is disturbed and the smooth progress of his work gets interrupted on account of Harvey's personal difficulties connected with his wife Effie, whom he abandoned some time before and who apparently has since become involved with a terrorist organisation. The terrorists' armed attacks in the area where Effie's ex-husband lives and works make him the chief suspect who is not only continually interrogated and harassed by the police, but also hounded by journalists thirsty of sensation and mercilessly infringing upon his privacy. In consequence, Harvey goes through a traumatic ordeal of undeserved suffering, and as a result he becomes like the biblical Job who so far has been absorbing Harvey's attention only on the level of theoretical speculation.

Through its numerous references to the *Book of Job* and explicit citations from the text of the Bible incorporated into the fictional discourse, *The Only Problem* provides a forum where the main protagonist pursues his philosophical query while debating the riddle of suffering with his friends, adversaries, and most of all with the unfathomable and incomprehensible wisdom of God. The intertextual knitting of excerpts from the biblical story with the narrative of fiction adds force to the metaphysical questions which the novel postulates and its main protagonist poses. Yet, the scope of intertextuality which *The Only Problem* demonstrates is even broader than the dialogue between different literary texts. It gets enlarged by the inclusion of a work of painting introduced by an extended *ekphrasis* which plays a very important role in the novel because it functions as a catalyst for the epiphanic intimation of the sought-for answer to the great puzzle of life.

While working on his exegetic book, Harvey often visits the local art museum in Epinal, where he spends long time contemplating a seventeenth-century painting "Job visité par sa femme" ("Job Visited by His Wife"),[2] by Georges de la Tour. Interestingly, Georges de la Tour's painting is better known under a slightly different title: "Job raillé par sa femme" ("Job Mocked by His Wife")

[2] This seventeenth-century painting by Georges de la Tour, a French Baroque painter, is housed in Musée départemental des Vosges in Epinal, France. Georges de la Tour is generally considered one of the most important painters of his age. Many of his works represent religious scenes painted in the chiaroscuro technique, which makes use of the interplay between light and darkness.

which is corroborated by the depiction of Job's wife in the Bible. Nevertheless, in Spark's novel only the former, and more neutral, version of the title is present as it reverberates in Harvey's mind. It is evidently closer to the painter's vision in which bitterness and mockery have been replaced by tender resignation shared by the wife and husband.

> Job's wife, tall, sweet-faced, with the intimation of a beautiful body inside the large tent-like case of her firm clothes, bending, long-necked solicitous over Job. It is night, it is winter. Job's wife wears a glorious red tunic over her dress. Job sits on a plain cube-shaped block. He might be in front of a fire, for the light of the candle alone cannot explain the amount of light that is cast on the two figures. […] Both are in their early prime, a couple in their thirties. (Indeed, their recently-dead children were not yet married.) His face looks up at his wife, sensitive, imploring some favour, urging some cause. What is his wife trying to tell him as she bends her sweet face towards him? What does he beg, this stricken man, so serene in his faith, so accomplished in argument? (*OP* 76–77)

The longer Harvey looks at "the sublime painting" (*OP* 75) the more acutely he realizes the discrepancy between the relevant verses from the Bible, which he studied, discussed and interpreted, and the artist's visualisation of them encapsulated in the painted image. Thus the painting opens for Harvey a totally new vista of perception.

> Harvey recalled that one of the standard commentators has suggested a special interpretation, something to the effect, 'Are you still going to be righteous? If you are going to die, curse God and get it off your chest first. It will do you good.' But even this, perhaps homely, advice doesn't fit in with the painting. Of course the painter was idealising some notion of his own; in his dream, Job and his wife are deeply in love. […] Here, she is by no means the carrier of Satan's message. She comes to comfort Job, reduced as he is to a mental and physical wreck. (*OP* 78)

Harvey lives in a kaleidoscopic world of shifting identities, rotating life partners and dubious friendships, where things are "predictable only up to a point" (*OP* 11) and nothing is what it appears. Unsurprisingly, the fictional discourse chosen for the narrative of that world is cast in the interrogative mode. Hence the novel may be regarded as an ongoing inconclusive interrogation which, however, is dominated by two issues: one that right from the start is claimed to be of paramount significance relates to Harvey's metaphysical query inspired by the *Book of Job*, and the other, which is soon given the same overriding importance, concerns the mystery of Effie. The figures of Job and his wife derived from the Bible constitute a patent link with Harvey's personal experience, for not only does Harvey find himself in the existential situation similar to Job's, but also his wife Effie begins to reveal some features which he sees in Job's wife from Georges de la Tour's painting. The resem-

blance between Effie and La Tour's rendition of Job's wife is a recurrent motif in the narrative.

> In order to have a better look at Job's wife's face, Harvey put his head to one side. Right from the first he had been struck by her resemblance to Effie in profile. She was like Ruth [Effie's sister], too, but more like Effie, especially about the upper part of her face. Oh, Effie, Effie, Effie. (*OP* 79)

Harvey thinks about that likeness when he is shown Effie's identikit during the police investigation:

> Harvey was still looking at the identikit. It reminded him, now, of Job's wife in La Tour's painting even though the drawing was full-face and the painting showed a profile. (*OP* 143)

At another point when Effie's identity is uncertain and it is supposed that she may have been confused with somebody else, Harvey talks about it with his Auntie Pet:

> '[…] I only say that there is one case where Effie looks like somebody else. I know of another.'
> 'Who is that?'
> 'Job's wife, in a painting.' (*OP* 172)

It should be emphasised that although Effie as a character is an important component in the narrative structure of *The Only Problem*, she never actually appears in the plot of the novel. Nevertheless she is very much present, but her presence is realized through her absence. There is an interesting parallel between Effie, Harvey's fugitive wife, and the wife of Job in the chiaroscuro painting, lit by the candlelight and standing at the side of her husband. The former's absence reinforces the latter's presence. Moreover, whereas Effie is surrounded by the torrents of words, Job's wife in the painting remains in silence.

Through his meditation of the painter's vision Harvey enters into that subtle sphere of silence that appertains to works of visual art and which harbours a substantial, even if intangible, meaning. Getting involved in a silent dialogue with Georges de la Tour's visual presentation of the biblical scene, Harvey puts himself in the process of capturing the message which is communicated, however vaguely, through the art of painting, though it eludes the art of words. The long ekphrastic passage built into the narrative structure perfectly fits into the space of silence in the otherwise logocentric discourse. Accordingly, Harvey gradually comes to understand that he is more likely to find answers to his tormenting questions in the comforting silence of the painting than in the heat of argument among the railing of words.

> *Job visité par sa femme*: To Harvey's mind there was much more in the painting to illuminate the subject of Job than in many of the lengthy commentaries that he knew so well. It was eloquent of a new idea, and yet, where had the painter found justification for his treatment of the subject? (*OP* 76)

Harvey Gotham and biblical Job are alike in their struggle for meaning, and in their urge to understand things which are vital for them. Furthermore, they are in the same way subject to the experience of pain and anguish enveloped in the enigma of unexplainable reasons. The pursuit of metaphysical and existential knowledge for both of them turns out to be the underlying principle which determines the main course of their lives. What Harvey defines in scholarly terms as "Job's problem," equally applies to himself and his own gnawing anxiety, for in his Job-like predicament Harvey is told nothing that would elucidate the puzzles he is confronting: "Nobody tells me anything" (*OP*, e.g. 106) runs like a leitmotif through Harvey's discourse. Hence the parallel of ignorance is entirely justified.

> Job's problem was partly a lack of knowledge. He was without access to any system of study which would point to the reason for his afflictions. He said specifically, "I desire to reason with God," and expected God to come out like man and state his case. […] Job's problem, as I was saying, was partly a lack of knowledge. Everybody talked but nobody told him anything about the reason for his sufferings. Not even God when he appears. Our limitations of knowledge make us puzzle over the cause of suffering, maybe it is the cause of suffering itself. (*OP* 111)

The most important analogy, however, is that in their search for answers both, Harvey and Job, get caught in the epistemological trap of words. That is the reason why Harvey does not find any clarification of Job's plight even in his most assiduous study of the *Book of Job* but, conversely, he can get an inkling of understanding of his own arduous experience while contemplating Georges de la Tour's painting and getting immersed in its meaningful silence. Therefore Harvey's early comment on the nature of Job's suffering acquires a new significance later, after he learned from his wordless dialogue with the painting the limited scope and insufficient capacity of words:

> […] for he [Job] not only argued the problem of suffering, he suffered the problem of argument. And that is incurable. (*OP* 30)

The Only Problem does not offer a clear-cut answer to the problem of Job's unjust suffering which has preoccupied the scholarly mind of the fictitious Harvey Gotham. Neither does it provide any definite explanation of the mystery of Effie. Yet, despite the obvious lack of an elucidation of the inscrutability inhering in life, or a solution to the metaphysical riddle, the narrative still leads to the attainment of an illumination which involves a serene accept-

ance of unanswerable questions on the plane of words, and a sense of liberating peace of mind and elation connected with the tasting of the meaningful silence encapsulated in visual art. Such epiphany which is the corollary of aesthetic delight is arrived at by means of ekphrasis which, far from being a mere description of the art object, reaches out beyond the strictly literary text and engages in a fruitful, though non-verbal, dialogue with the visual. It can be achieved because ekphrasis enters through the gate of words into the domain of evocative silence residing in painting and accompanying the logocentric text of the novel.

Harvey's experience with Georges de la Tour's painting shows that epiphany is involved when the graphic text of the painting is imposed upon the relevant literary text of the Bible. Therefore Muriel Spark's novel challenges some of modern critical assertions which tend to divest language and image of their power to generate understanding. W.J. Thomas Mitchell refers to such opinions when he speaks of "prison-houses" of word and image functioning in contemporary critical idiom: "For modern criticism, language and imagery have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison-houses which lock the understanding away from the world" (Mitchell 8). The discourse of *The Only Problem* undermines this widespread critical claim, for it shows that the intersection of the verbal with the visual opens the prison-house and lets in the light of cognition.

When *The Only Problem* is viewed from the ekphrastic perspective its impact begins to resemble poetry. In consequence the inconclusiveness of the fictional discourse becomes an asset rather than drawback. Harvey eventually accepts the core of mystery which lies at the heart of human suffering and constitutes one of the prerogatives of God. That is why there is no trace of either pain or sad resignation in his admission: "The *Book of Job* will never come clear. It doesn't matter; it's a poem" (*OP* 132). Harvey's observation reflects the awareness of many novelists and practitioners of discursive prose in literary fiction that the language of poetry, like the language of painting, has a unique capacity to communicate the apparently incommunicable.

Concluding this discussion it has to be restated that W.H. Auden's poem and Muriel Spark's novel are treated here only as two particular illustrations of what takes place across the vast body of literature, where ekphrastic writing is continually enriched and complemented with the meaningful silence of an image painted upon the canvas. As a result the intertextual dialogue between two "Sister Arts" generates new meanings. It seems that literature, thanks to its rhetorical strategies and operative capacity of words, is especially predisposed to allow the great merger of different arts, which brings about heightened perception and profounder understanding. Thus it becomes conducive to epiphany which never ceases to be one of the major objectives of all art.

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